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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that oral reading of written composition can be an effective method of sensitizing students to the presence of grammatical and logical errors. A sample paragraph is used to illustrate the technique; guidelines for use include the suggestions that students be asked to look for one particular type of compositional error (such as subject/verb disagreement) and that they strive to reproduce the actual sense of the text, even when that text is wordy or lacks logic. The limitations of the oral-reading technique, as well as its possible applications in small-group and one-to-one teaching situations, are discussed. (KS)

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"LISTEN, MY CHILDREN, AND YOU SHALL HEAR": An Oral Approach to Correcting Written Errors

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This paper must, by necessity, begin with a paragraph or two of autobiography. I applied to graduate school too late in the year to be assigned to a regular graduate assistant position teaching freshman composition. I was told, however, that perhaps a position might be open at the English Language Center across campus where newly-arrived foreign students were taught English as a second language. I applied and was soon put in charge of a group of Saudi Arabians, fresh off the plane from Jedda, to whom I was to teach English pronunciation and grammar. This experience and those which were to follow over the next three years were valuable for more reasons than I could possibly explain here, but to the point of this paper, it was during these months that I learned the value, yea, the indispensability of the oral reading of papers to discover errors and, of even more importance, to indicate these mistakes to the writer himself.

To illustrate the usefulness of oral reading in introducing foreign students to our language, let me use here a simple exercise in inflection:

A: I saw a moving truck today.

B: How fast was it going?

A: It wasn't going at all; it was being loaded.

B: I thought you said you saw a moving truck.

A: I said a moving truck, not a moving truck.

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Some explanation was obviously in order when this exercise was used but much less than if the sentence had been left to be read silently. Likewise, in pronunciation drills, we worked on those areas where various language groups were the weakest: those speaking Mandarine Chinese had no 's-sh' distinction, the Spanish speaker could not separate 'b' and 'v' nor could those from Arabia always delineate the 'd-t' discrepancy but they learned the differences by first listening to the instructor, then to each other, and finally to themselves, pronuncing the difference. And this carried right over into grammar and composition classes as well.

But what does this have to do with teaching composition in a normal college classroom filled with a cross section of less-than-eager nominally English-speaking freshmen? A great deal, in fact. The common denominator between those Saudis still suffering from jet lag and your freshman is the fact that language has been oral far longer than it has been written and there is something in every man that relates to the sound of oral expression. Long before Gutenberg, before the Dead Sea scrolls, or even before the Neanderthal drawings, man was talking and not only just to say how hungry he was but to express the workings of his imagination in such ways as describing how big the mastodon was that got away. Man has relied on oral communication from the very beginning; there is no indication that Adam and Eve used sign language. And therefore, there has evolved in Man a special sensitivity to the spoken word.

This sensitivity reveals itself in the fact that even when we read silently, there is a "voice" at work within our minds which,

some research says, actually utilizes the organs of speech. Taken from this angle, therefore, reading aloud is simply a magnification of reading silently and if we can find mistakes or recognize errors by reading compositions to ourselves, how much more efficient it would be to read them aloud or to have them read aloud to us. The level of comprehension jumps significantly when material of any kind is read orally; a good reader could even make the Sears and Roebuck catalog or the side of a cereal box sound interesting.

Since this paper is really an annotated list of suggestions about this method of correcting composition errors, let me begin by elaborating on that slightly misleading phrase I just used: "good reader." To a great extent, the success of this method depends on the reader and his ability to read naturally and with some feeling for the text. On the other hand, this is not an exercise in interpretative reading nor is any extraordinary expertise necessary. The reader ought to be aware of what he is trying to accomplish and, just incidentally, he ought to be able to recognize at least the most blatant compositional errors on sight so that he might highlight them very slightly without drawing attention to himself or without doing violence to the text. Consider the following paragraph, written for the sake of illustration:

> Salem, Massachusetts, was the location of some important witchtrials along toward the end of the seventeenth century which resulted in the deaths of nineteen people who was hanged and one old man who was crushed to death under stones because he refused to answer questions, not wanting to give his property up. The people of Salem done a great harm to they that was accused. The church members of the town spied on anyone who looked or was acting suspicious while the members of the church also kept an eye out for anyone who was behaving strange. The citizens

> of Marblehead were mainly concerned with fishing during these years. Even today, wanting to see where them things took place, the witch house and witch museum is filled with tourists from everywheres. And since the people of Salem are glad to have them.

In reading this paragraph, a reader has only to avoid a deadly monotone, recognize the pauses directed by the punctuation, and the mistakes will advertise themselves. Take the last sentence, for instance. The reader will, by the presence of the word "since," naturally read it as though there is more to the sentence and the presence of a fragment will be immediately evident: "And since the people of Salem are glad to have them" as opposed to what it would sound like without the "since": "And the people of Salem are glad to have them," which is an acceptable concluding sentence for a paragraph. The "good reader," then, can be almost any student in the class who can read three or four sentences in a row without stumbling on simple vocabulary words.

Having established the modest requirements for the reader in this oral correcting method, we turn our attention to the listeners, those who will be correcting the errors they hear. In our model paragraph, there are mistakes of several kinds, some more readily discernible than others. For the typical composition class, the fragment at the end might possibly be the most readily recognized error followed by the several lapses in agreement, the errant pronoun ("to they"), and the wordiness of the first sentence. It is adviseable, when this method is first being used, to tell the class which mistakes are being looked for so that their vigilance won't be spread over the entire range of error possibilities and also so they won't be frustrated into finding mistakes where none occur. Let's say the subject for the day is subject-verb

agreement. When they hear phrases like "people who was hanged . . ." or ". . . people of Salem done . . ." or ". . . the witch house and witch museum is filled . . . ," they should have some recognition, however vague, that something is wrong. This oral correcting exercise will reinforce what they have read in their textbook or what the instructor has been putting on the board.

It is important for the success of this exercise that the negative example not be allowed to stand unchanged for very long. The student who recognizes something amiss in the subject-verb combination should be encouraged to offer a corrected version which is then incorporated into the text of the model and is immediately read aloud so that the contrast between the original and the corrected version will be evident. Even those with low thresholds of error perception will be able to detect an improvement in the corrected form because although they might not have been able to locate the problem immediately and on their own, they have an inclination toward the correct form based on years of exposure, however spasmodic, to correctly written and spoken English. This last point, I recognize, is a controversial one but it has been my observation that even the poorest student will, more often than not choose the correct form of a sentence when the alternatives are presented orally.

Nor are blatant errors like these failures of agreement the only ones possible to correct or study by this method. On a second reading, the wordiness of the opening sentence will be evident to most listeners. This will be especially true if the subject of wordiness is combined with a discussion of the function of the topic sentence. Just the simple statement that "Salem,

Massachusetts, was the location of some important witch trials toward the end of the seventeenth century" is sufficient to introduce the paragraph. The details of the number who were killed and especially about the one man who was crushed under stones should be in a separate sentence. Again, this will be clear when the student is given a positive or corrected model. In reading to communicate wordiness or run-on sentences, however, the student must be careful not to pause where a pause is not called for but must strive for continuity even when such continuity is the product of excess. The first auricular recognition the listener has in the case of wordiness should be sense that the writer has run a red light and should have stopped several words ago. He may also feel frustrated at not being able to remember the beginning of this overly long sentence and will come to the conclusion that whoever wrote what he is hearing has failed to separate his thoughts into proper slots and is being unnecessarily confusing. Also, what does "giving his property up" have to do with being crushed to death under stone, he will wonder, and will resent the writer for not making the connection clear.

This matter of listener attitude toward the form of a piece, read silently or orally, as well as toward its content is one which needs to be considered at length. It is obviously harder to measure but I think it is more decipherable when the material is read orally since that method, as we have said, eliminated one of the barriers which separates the reader/listener from the written material when the reading is done silently. By removing this middle "layer," as it were, the listener is brought into more direct contact with the written material and therefore, the

mistakes in syntax as well as the clever phrases are much more evident. There is an immediacy in the oral reading process that is not present in silent reading, and therefore, the listener's reaction to the writer's lapses will surface more readily and are likely to be more clearly defined, even if the listener doesn't know what the trouble is, if such an apparent contradiction makes any sense. To put it another way, even the poorest student, as we have said above, will be able to recognize errors more quickly when the material is read orally than when he has to read it silently, and even though he may not be able to put a neat tag on what is wrong, he will have the distinct sense that something is amiss.

The Salem paragraph also has mistakes which are somewhat less obvious even than wordiness, at least to the untutored ear. The lack of parallelism in ". . . spied on anyone who looked or was acting suspicious . . ." might need some in-class prompting to get a response because normal usage patterns often include such aberrations. The redundancy or lack of variety in the double use of "church members" and "members of the church" will be a bit more obvious since it will strike the ear of the listener as awkward or at least as violating that sense of smooth syntax we all have to one degree or another. As for the use of "everywheres," the recognition of that as an error might depend as much on the geographical location as on the academic ability of the class since there are several parts of the country in which such a colloquialism is acceptable in conversation and since we're giving the student his own language . . . oh, but that's another subject altogether.

So far we have been speaking primarily about the use of oral reading to correct errors or phrases or, at most, in sentences. It now remains for us to examine briefly the value of this approach for studying paragraph construction. This is a more difficult procedure but it can be done. Take the Marblehead sentence in our paragraph. It will be evident on first reading that those fisherman in the neighboring town to Salem have nothing to do with the subject of Salem and her witches. Again, that vague sense of order of which we have spoken interferes and tells the listener that something is out of place. It is not quite as simple with the organic development of the paragraph. It takes careful and frequent readings to communicate the development of the paragraph from the topic sentence through the transitions to the conclusion. First of all, paragraph development cannot be studied until the written piece has been corrected and revised. When each sentence has been repaired and a connection between these corrected sentences has been established, it is then time to study the growth and structure of the complete paragraph. As the class becomes accustomed to listening to oral reading of their written work for the purpose of finding mistakes, they will become versatile enough to notice flabby paragraph structure as quickly as they can spot wordy sentences or misplaced prepositions. When this point is reached, your students will be well on their way to establishing yet another checkpoint for their own work and to insuring less work for you and better grades for themselves.

I would be much less than honest if I did not recognize that this method of correction is neither new nor flawless. I know that the oral reading of written work to correct errors has been

used for years by many experienced teachers and with varying degrees of success. I have written this paper not because I think the approach is radically innovative but because I think it can be a useful supplement to more common methods of correction and evaluation and because there might be some applications that those familiar with the procedure might not have used previously. It is likely that there are many circumstances under which this approach to textual correction would be impractical, even useless. It is obviously of no worth to help with spelling errors but I think it does have possibilities when studying punctuation. This subject could occupy another whole paper but I think some very effective teaching about punctuation can be done with the oral reading approach. Yet another difficulty I have experienced and which we mentioned previously is a tendency on the part of some students to identify proper construction as improper because they have become syntactical vigilantes for one of several reasons.

These small difficulties aside, I am convinced that the oral reading of student compositions for the purpose of detecting errors of all kinds is an approach worthy of serious consideration. It can be very effective in a one-to-one situation in the office or writing lab when a student is persistently repeating a single or several related mistakes. It is also useful in small groups since peer evaluation is less threatening than instructor evaluation and since this is a good way to keep the students from feeling as though your red-penned hieroglyphics represented the only measure of their work. Finally, it is best to have the printed text in front of the student while it is being read so that both the silent and the oral processes can work simultaneously.

I am neither an audiologist nor a behavioral psychologist so I can't tell you why, but there is an interesting difference on the part of most students in their reaction to mistakes in their own work as opposed to lapses in the work of others. They often don't smell the fouling of their own nest, but then one suspects they don't sniff very hard. On the other hand, it is a great game hunt, to change the metaphor only slightly, to look for the elephantine flaws in other people's syntactical jungles.

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